Grizzly Bear Recovery

Overview and Update

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BACKGROUND

When Lewis and Clark explored the West in the early 1800s, an estimated 50,000 grizzly bear roamed between the Pacific Ocean and the Great Plains, across vast stretches of open and unpopulated land. But when pioneers moved in, grizzly bears moved out. As European settlement expanded over the next hundred years, towns and cities sprung up, and habitat for these large omnivores -- along with their numbers -- shrunk drastically. Today, with the western United States inhabited by millions of Americans, only a few small corners of grizzly country remain, supporting about 1,100 wild grizzly bears.

In 1975, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the grizzly bear as a threatened species in the Lower 48 States, placing the species under federal protection. This status led to implementation of a grizzly bear recovery plan, as required under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The objective of recovery of listed species is to achieve self-sustaining populations in the wild that no longer need protection under the ESA.

The first Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan was developed by 1982. In 1983 the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) was formed -- with members from the National Park Service; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; USDA Forest Service; the states of Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming; and British Columbia -- to recover grizzly bears.

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

While the historic range of grizzlies once covered over a third of what is now the continental United States, the Recovery Plan necessarily focuses on the six remaining areas in Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming that have habitat suitable for self-sustaining grizzly populations; only five of these are currently inhabited by grizzlies.

Grizzly Ecosystems	Current Population Estimates
Yellowstone	400-600 bears
Northern Continental Divide	300-400 bears
Selkirk	45-50 bears
Cabinet-Yaak	30-40 bears
North Cascades	5-30 bears
Bitterroot	none

In the ecosystems currently inhabited by bears, recovery efforts have included reducing the potential for human-bear encounters and related bear mortality, and providing secure habitat for females to raise their young. Recovery activities include public education, reduction in bear access to human food and garbage, evaluation of road densities, research on availability of grizzly foods, and other study of bears and their habitat. Using the best currently available scientific data, an IGBC subcommittee for each ecosystems focuses on specific actions, with the goal of ensuring adequate numbers of bears and suitable habitat for sustaining recovered populations.

Yellowstone

As the habitat area most remote from the other remaining grizzly bear habitat, the Yellowstone ecosystem has been the primary focus of grizzly recovery efforts to date. This work has been very successful; the grizzly population numbers and distribution here have exceeded target recovery levels for the last 2 years. The population of adult females grizzlies, for example, has grown from a low point in 1983 of less than 30 to about 100 today. Recovery work continues to reduce grizzly bear mortalities and ensure habitat standards for maintaining a recovered population. A draft Conservation Strategy for managing this population in the future, once it is recovered and removed from federal ESA protection, was released for public review in March, 2000.

Northern Continental Divide

The grizzly population in this area includes Glacier National Park and adjacent areas in Canada. Ongoing non-invasive genetic sampling began in 1998 by the Greater Glacier Bear DNA Project to more accurately estimate bear population in the northern third of this ecosystem.

Selkirk

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined in early 1999 that the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak populations should be combined as one "distinct population segment," and that this combined population was warranted for listing as endangered. However, Selkirk/Cabinet-Yaak bears are currently precluded from reclassification due to higher priority listing actions for species needing more immediate protection. At a future date, when the Service formally proposes to reclassify these populations as "endangered," that action would include designating the bears from the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak ecosystems as a single population.

Cabinet-Yaak

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service first determined in 1993 that the Cabinet-Yaak population is warranted for listing as endangered, but precluded by higher priority species. The 1999 "warranted, but precluded" finding for the combined Selkirk/Cabinet-Yaak population, and the finding that the two populations should be treated as one because the areas are connected, are conclusions bolstered by evidence that bears travel between the two areas.

North Cascades

While study of this very rugged and remote habitat indicates that this ecosystem is capable of supporting a self-sustaining population of grizzlies, only a "remnant" population remains, incapable of enduring without active recovery efforts, including possible augmentation with bears from other areas. The Service determined in 1991 that this population was warranted for listing as "endangered." However, workload on other species in greater danger of extinction has delayed the Service from proposing "endangered" status for these populations. A recovery plan for North Cascades was approved in 1997, but has not been implemented due to lack of funds.

Bitterroot

Despite numerous studies of this area, there have been no verifiable sightings of grizzly bears for over 50 years. As the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service noted in a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) released in July, 1997, grizzly recovery in this ecosystem would require the reintroduction of bears from other areas. The Service proposed such reintroduction as its preferred alternative in the draft EIS; the final EIS will be released in March, 2000, with the Service's final decision following in 30-90 days. Any reintroduction would depend on funding.